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RED RIDING HOOD*

Lee Burns

Behind the darkest folk tales lie attempts to interpret fear. Although the tales take place in domestic settings, the events in the stories dramatize fears which are universal. One folk tale which has endured is Red Riding Hood. The fears projected into the tale are: fear of the invasion (natural or supernatural) of the home, fear of becoming subject to the destructive will or power of another, and the fear of deception. That this tale should be an echo of older fears involving natural forces (which have been incorporated into myths) should not be surprising. Fear of the changeability and violence in human nature that appears in folk tales has its counterpart in myth in the fear of natural forces and their changeability and violence. In Red Riding Hood, the evil, mesmerizing darkness of the Wolf echoes the image of the darkness of night and death. The character of Red Riding Hood is the counterpart of day, light, and innocent gaiety. Some folklorists claim that the tale echoes a myth of sunrise and sunset. Henry Bett cites the red cloak as evidence:

> The Letts have a story which tells how the daughter of the sun hung her red cloak on an oak tree. At the other end of the world, the Australians of Encounter Bay say that the sun is a woman and has a lover among the dead who has given her a red kangaroo skin in which she appears at her rising.

Bett then explains the wolf as "personification of night." He cites the recurrence of the wolf in Norse mythology as a destroyer of light.[1] In the Index of Fairy Tales Myths, and Legends, there is a similar claim for the myth of Helge, who, to escape his enemies, disguised himself as a wolf and who turned out to be a God of night and darkness.[2]

Although it seems farfetched to think that so simple a tale as Red Riding Hood should have come from such dynamic legends, the particular vividness and enduring qualities of the red hood and the figure of the wolf do have their roots in traditional symbols which strengthen this supposition. The color red, and its association with blood and passion, would prefigure the violence to come. It is interesting that the substitution of color (for instance, gold) should make a difference. In Little Golden Hood, there are none of the ominous overtones of Red Riding Hood. The golden hood is not only divine, linked to golden flowers and the sun, but it

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serves as protection for the little girl. Faith in human good sense is exhibited: Grandmother kills the wolf, there is a lesson learned, and a happy ending.[3] The red hood incorporates qualities of life, light, and sexual energy.[4] The use of the hood and its association with death adds to the ominous quality of the tale.[5]

The figure of the wolf arouses terror, not only because of his savage wildness, but because of traditional connotations of darkness and evil. In the Dictionary of Symbols, he is cited as being the "symbol of evil," the "monster" who lived in the depths of the earth and who would "break out of this prison . . . devour the son."[6] Medieval Christian thinking marks him as a symbol of the devil, the whore, a beast who massacres "anybody who passes by with a fury of greediness." He also has the eyes of the Devil and is capable of mesmerizing his victims, if he chooses.[7] The combination of evil, sexual aggression, and gluttonous violence, then, is historically connected with the wolf. It is surely his nature in Red Riding Hood. His association with darkness and destruction links him, and by extension the tale, to the ancient myths.

The fear of sexual power characterizes all versions of the tale. It represents an irresistable force, a force in the service of greed and death. In the French tales this sexuality is more explicit: the little girl is lured into the bed. The rhythmic, intimate repetition of questions leading to the moment of climax (or anti-climax) is extremely sexual. The mesmerizing qualities of the wolf as male power add to the eroticism. But sexual eroticism is obvious only to the adult. The terror the tale holds for the child occurs because the eroticism exploited is one of far deeper significance—that of the intimacy with another's body, be it mother, father, or grandmother—a tactile desire which is far deeper than the desire for heterosexual intercourse. This deepest desire and trust betrayed is what makes the wolf's violence so much more horrifying.

In male chauvinistic terms, this tale is an act of sex in itself. Perrault's version is explicitly an act of aggression against the female because of its faintly disguised prurience and enthusiasm for the final "kill," with its expression of male exaltation and triumph. The penetration of the house (with its fragile latch, bobbin, or string guarding the door) as a feminine stronghold, the enactment of destruction and violence by a male, is obvious. It is interesting that when the tale comes from the male-female storytelling tradition of folklore, the female figures emerge with more luck. The wolf is cut up and his "head" is chopped off (a bit of feminine fantasy creeping in). In Grimm, fantasy is even greater in the dumping of rocks into his stomach, revenge for the "infliction" of pregnancy.

The versions of the tale vary in the exploitation of fear of violence, and the use of erotic stimulation, and work to achieve different ends. Some are amoral, some contain moral values. Some are highly erotic, some much less so, to the point where sexual eroticism is almost suppressed. All assume certain social attitudes toward children as a result, and deserve looking at for this reason.

Two versions of the tale still published relatively intact are the French tale of Perrault and the German folk version collected by the Grimm brothers. The plot of both tales is derived from an old French tale called the Story of Grandmother.

There is no special moral in this tale; the cannabalistic, sexual, and scatological events are matter-of-factly stated. No maternal warning foreshadows the grisly future. The end is farcical and anticlimactic in comparison with the Perrault and Grimm versions.

Suspense caused by sexual tension and fear of violence builds up as the bzou (werewolf) directs her to undress:

> "Undress, my child," said the bzou, "and come and sleep beside me."
> "Where should I put my apron?"
> "Throw it in the fire, my child; you don't need it any more."
> And she asked where to put all the other garments, the bodice, the dress, the skirt, and the hose, and the wolf replied:
> "Throw them in the fire, my child; you will need them no more."

The vision of the wolf as a diabolic being comes through here. His mesmerizing qualities hold the little girl hypnotized as she does her medieval strip tease. The provocative qualities of the passage are inflamed by the acquiescence of the little girl; here our enjoyment of the game almost makes us forget that the game is almost up. When the child says, "Oh, Grandmother, that big mouth you have!" and the wolf replies, "All the better to eat you with, my child!", she decides she has to relieve herself. In spite of the bzou's insistence that she do it in bed, she has her way and goes outside, tieing the leash he has attached to her to a tree. The bzou, growing impatient, snaps, "Are you making cables?" and jumps out of bed to fetch her, only to find she has escaped.[8]

Because of its scatological wit and nonviolence, the ending undercuts the violence of the plot. It domesticates the supernatural werewolf and assumes that children are capable of the cunning of adults. There is a down-to-earth order in the tale that is much different from the moral tales or the tales idealizing children.

Another quality of the tale which adds to this order is the rapidity, the matter-of-fact nature of the act of violence. Within one short paragraph, the wolf has killed Grandmother, put her flesh in the pantry, and a bottle of her blood on the shelf. The chilling vision of evil occurs with the deliberate, casual invitation to the little girl to eat the "meat" and "wine", the blood and body of her own Grandmother. The mixture of sacrilege with barbarity adds to the shock value of the act.

Perrault fills the old amoral horror story with an erotic tale of warning in his Red Riding Hood. Although it is told with amusement and relish, it is a moral tale: pretty little girls should not talk to wolves (males) on the path. Jacques Barchilon in his article "L'ironie et l'humour dans les 'Contes' de Perrault," explores this erotic warning in detail. He speaks of Perrault's penchant for amusing himself as well as the children by entering into their game.[9] He is amusing himself vicariously with the thought of seduction while warning little girls who are innocent and pretty to be careful. The moral is implicit in the plot, and early in the story there are presentiments of the end: " . . . the poor child, who did not know how dan-

gerous it is to stop and speak to wolves . . ." [10] In spite of her innocence, there is evidence that she (like her predecessor in the Story of Grandmother), has more than a bit of erotic curiosity. The violence is darker, not in spite of the eroticism, but because of the nature of this eroticism; it exhibits the tragedy of innocence betrayed. The innocent eroticism in the child is bound up in the tender intimacy of close contact with a beloved adult. This innocent trust followed by a brutal death is what shocks and frightens children. It is the adult who sees himself as a wolf, who seems to pick out sexual seduction in the tale, not the child. The tale is also more frightening because of its finality. There is no recourse, no comforting denouement. It summons up the ancient mythical vision of the end of the world, an eternity of night.

The Grimm tale of Red Riding Hood, which appeared in the early 1800's, evokes a more exact memory of the daylight myth because the rescue is analogous to the return of day.[11] But the tale does not contain the comforting qualities of the myth. The sly eroticism in Perrault is missing; there is repressed sexuality in the German tale. The explicit request to come to bed is gone. However, the scene on the path, the incantation, the erotic mesmerizing of the little girl before the wolf springs, is still there. This repressed sexuality (also symbolized by the guilt involved with picking flowers, the forgetting herself in sensual delight) is accompanied by increasing violence and a barbaric, sadistic sense of justice. What could be more sexually perverse than the wolf's strange "pregnancy" with the two females inside? What could be more brutal than the following "pregnancy" of rocks ? It is also significant that it is sweet, innocent Red Riding Hood who fetches the rocks and helps to fill his belly. He dies, ripped by the weight of the rocks when he tries to escape.

The novelty and ingenuity of this revenge lends sadistic appeal to this tale. It acts against a humanistic involvement a child might have toward pain and suffering. Unlike Perrault, who has written a moral story about innocence and its frailty in the face of raw violence, the Grimms' tale has its roots in the necessity for obedience. "I will never again wander off into the forest as long as I live, when my mother forbids it," intones Red Riding Hood.[12] Stressing justice and obedience, the tale shows torture committed with ingenious flippancy; the tale reveals a dark humor as potent as any of the moderns. The frightening thing is that the torture is meant to serve the idea of the story—that of the necessity of obedience to authority and the administration of justice. Compared to Perrault's vision of the child as erotic innocent, Grimms' tales reveal the child to be erotically cruel, as cruel as the old werewolf in the Story of Grandmother.

While both versions of the tale continue to be published, proving their irresistable strength, there have been rewrites of Red Riding Hood which exhibit divergent and interesting views toward the character of Red Riding Hood and, by extension, children.

Some late nineteenth and earlier twentieth-century versions tamed both the violent and erotic incidents, watering down the purity of emotion of the older tales. There are long, sissyfied descriptions of Red Riding Hood and drawn out sections of plot which tend to turn a lesson about deception and violence into an unreal

vision of the child as an innocent, beautiful fool, protected in life. The interpreter of the tale has deceived his child reader about the true meaning of danger. In the selection from a set of books entitled The Young Folks Treasury, for instance, there are three pages of long vague, rambling and sentimental prose, compared to half a page of action. Red Riding Hood doesn't even meet the wolf until the third page of the four-page story. There is the assumption that to be sweet and innocent is enough in life. Someone will always rescue the weak and good from the mean and cruel. Virtue is its own reward (plus the added bonus of God's grace, presumably).

Walter de la Mare wrote a witty version of Red Riding Hood which compares interestingly with the sentimental Red. His Red Riding Hood is vain, and this vanity sets the stage for her deception. The eroticism is back in this tale—stylish, deliberate and subtle in the suggestive behavior of the wolf. His voice is "queer and husky," "his jaws opened and grinned; and then in tones as wheedling and buttery-smooth as his tongue could manage, he said, 'Good afternoon, my dear. I hope you are refreshed after your little nap. But what, may I ask, are you doing here, all alone in the woods and in that beautiful bright red hood, too?' As he uttered these words, he went on grinning at her in so friendly a fashion that Little Red Riding Hood could not but smile at him in return." De la Mare's point seems to be this: seduction is an exploitation of vanity. The wolf then, is not wholly the villain. In fact, he is quite the stereotype of the dandy. When Red Riding Hood describes her method of signalling Grannie, he says, "But how clever, and where does your poor dear Grannie live and which way are you going?" [13] By making the wolf's dialogue chatty and urbane, and adding the dimensions of vanity and the parody of slick, seductive behavior, de la Mare has humanized the Wolf to a greater degree. Mixed feelings for the reader accompany the justice of the wolf's end. He is so comical in Grannie's nightie, and so vulnerable:

> "At this faraway strange sound in his dreams, the Wolf opened—though by scarcely more than a hair's breath—his dull, drowsy eyes. But at glimpsing the woodman, his wits came instantly back to him and he knew his danger. Too late! Before even, clogged up in Grannie's nightgown, he could gather his legs together to spring out of bed, the woodman, with one mighty stroke of the axe, had finished him off." [14]

Far from being harmed, the two females appear happy and gay; in fact, Grannie's rheumatism is cured from all the "warmth and squeezing" in the wolf's belly.

Walter de la Mare has written a version superior to all of the modern versions I found. His wit, his amused tone reminiscent of Perrault, is true to the erotic humor of the old French tale. His sense of justice is complicated and much more sensitive than the cruel justice of the German folk tales. His refining of the moral warning of Perrault to include vanity makes the story richer for children, without being preachy.

One of the interesting topics in twentieth-century literature is the relationship between victim and victimizer. Genet, Reage, and others have written complicated and perplexing novels and plays about this subject. Ionesco, in The Lesson, uses the Red Riding Hood tale as the spirit of his play (whether or not it is intentional), for example. Ann Sexton, in her new book of poetry, Transformations, attempts to get at the deepest level of Grimms' fairy tales. In her poem "Red Riding Hood," she examines the vague, dual nature of actions involving deception and cruelty.

Like de la Mare, she makes the wolf strangely vulnerable. In her first few lines she writes:

> Long ago
> There was a strange deception:
> a wolf dressed in frills.
> A kind of transvestite.[15]

The wolf is described as quite an impulsive fellow, not cruel but very hungry: ". . . he planned to eat them both,/the grandmother an old carrot/and the child a shy budkin/in a red, red hood." He does his job in a hurry, eating Grandmother "as quick as a slap./Then he put on her nightdress and cap and snuggled down into the bed/A deceptive fellow." He "gobbled Red Riding Hood down like a gumdrop. Now he was fat." This is almost a complete reversal of roles. He is childlike in his disguise and in his eagerness. He does not act like the humans, who cut him open while he is still alive and fill his belly with rocks and sew him up. He is sad, grotesquely funny, without the ability of humans to abstract ideas to justify their own brutality:

> "The wolf, they decided, was too mean to be simply shot
> so they filled his belly with large stones and sewed him up.
> He was as heavy as a cemetery and when he woke up and
> tried to run off he fell over dead. Killed by his own weight.

Sexton suggests that his "crime" did not approach theirs:

> Those two remembering
> nothing naked and brutal
> from that little death,
> that little birth,
> from their going down
> and their lifting up.

It is interesting that this adaptation of the Grimm tale (the most direct echo of the old myth of sunset and sunrise) should be also the occasion for such words as these, which suggest both the fetus in the womb, birth, and sunrise and sunset imagery.

Darkness and light, good and evil, male and female, the home and the wilderness are the forces of opposition in the tale of Red Riding Hood. From the matter-

of-fact erotic horror of the old French tale to the relativistic humanism of Ann Sexton with her ironic, gentle treatment of aggression, the story casts an enchantment which is ageless in its dark appeal.

[1] Henry Bett, M. A., Nursery Rhymes and Tales (Detroit, Mich., 1924), pp. 20-22.

[2] Index of Fairy Tales, Myths, and Legends, 2nd ed. rev. and enl., (Boston, 1926), p. 746.

[3] Andrew Lang, Red Fairy Book (London, 1959), pp. 225-229.

[4] J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, (New York, 1962), p. 52.

[5] Ibid., p. 143.

[6] Ibid., p. 355.

[7] T. H. White, ed., The Book of Beasts; being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century (London, 1955), pp. 56-61.

[8] Paul Delarue, ed., The Borzoi Book of French Folk Tales (New York, 1956), pp. 230-232.

[9] Jacques Barchilon, "L'ironie et l'humour dans les 'Contes' de Perrault," Studi Francesi, II (1967), p. 260.

[10] Perrault, "Little Red Riding Hood", Favorite Fairy Tales (New York, 1907), pp. 87-91.

[11] Bett, Nursery Rhymes and Tales, p. 21. Bett says, ". . . the German version of the story, Rothkappchen, ends with the arrival of the hunter, who rips up the sleeping wolf, when the little damsel in her red cap comes out again safe and sound. It is the picturesque story of the adventure of the red sun devoured by the monstrous darkness at sunset, and then disgorged again at sunrise."

[12] Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Fairy Tales (Cleveland, 1947), p. 63.

[13] Walter de la Mare, Told Again; traditional tales told by Walter de la Mare (Oxford, 1927), pp. 110-111.

[14] Ibid., p. 117.

[15] Ann Sexton, Transformations(Boston, 1971), pp. 77-79.